as these are all middle-class, college educated women, they tend to fit the general active leisure participation pattern reported as characteristic.[13] The differences found among the five role categories in type of activity suggest that each category may have predominant interests which can feasibly be pursued under the conditions of available time characteristic for women with given role combinations.

This notion emerges clearly for the three categories of mothers who differ both in amount and type of leisure activity. But this finding is qualified by the amount of domestic help available. Women with regular help can be highly active even when they have very young children. Mothers with minimal help regardless of role constellation category are lower in leisure participation. Since 38.6 percent of the 189 mothers have minimal domestic help, these represent substantial numbers whose leisure participation level is still largely tied to the constellation of roles they perform.

In conclusion, we must confront our inability to answer the question of how to interpret the relationship between domestic help and high leisure activity level. Do highly active women seek help so they can be freer for leisure pursuits? Or do women with domestic help find themselves with time to fill and therefore seek out activities? Although the role categories are comparable in socioeconomic status, we cannot ascertain to what degree having or not having domestic help is directly a function of other variables, such as income, values, the availability of help and access to leisure facilities.

[13] Komarovsky, *loc. cit.;* Slater, *op. cit.,* Charles R. Wright and Herbert Hyman, "Voluntary Association Memberships of American Adults: Evidence From National Sample Surveys," *American Sociological Review,* 23 (June 1958), pp. 284-294.

SPEECH AND SOCIAL STATUS IN AMERICA*

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ABSTRACT

The importance of one's speech as an indicator of social status has received little attention in America. Several writers of books on social stratification have even suggested that the speech differences between members of upper and lower classes are very subtle and inconsequential. This article presents research evidence to the contrary, based primarily on three research projects conducted by the present author and two by other researchers. The findings suggest that persons' social status is revealed by their voice—even when content-free speech is used, e.g., counting from one to 20. Persons speaking one regional dialect of American English can identify the social status of persons speaking different dialects. The research also attempts to isolate the various speech qualities which reveal one's social status and to investigate the ability of speakers to disguise these qualities.

Language has long been recognized as a symbolic indicator of social class. Barber[1] points out in his text, *Social Stratification,* that in India the ability to use written language, i.e., to read and write, had long been a symbol of Brahman caste membership. In nineteenth-century Russia, the upper classes spoke French, the language of the court, in preference to their native language which they shared with the lower classes. In modern European countries the speech patterns of the different classes are often so gross as to be considered different dialects. The middle- and upper-class Germans are expected to speak "Hoch Deutsch" or high German. But it is

* This research was done while Professor Ellis was a research assistant in the Communications Research Center at Purdue University. It was conducted under the guidance of Dr. W. Charles Redding and with the financial support of a National Science Foundation grant to the Communications Research Center.

[1] Bernard Barber, *Social Stratification* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1957), p. 151.

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acceptable for the working and lower classes to speak a regional variation of "Platt Deutsch" or low German. George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion,* points out how vital he thought language was as an indicator of social status in England.

The prominence of speech as an indicator of social status in foreign lands seems to be fairly well accepted. However, its prominence in America seems to be more questionable, as is indicated by the statement of Barber:

> In American language and speech, as in so many other kinds of American symbolic phenomena, the symbolization of differences in social class position has been subtle rather than gross. Regional differences in accent and diction are probably greater than differences of social class position. All social classes speak roughly the same except that the better educated upper and middle classes have better diction and grammar. This is a product of their superior education.[2]

The present paper will present research findings which are contrary to Barber's statement. These will be followed by a discussion of additional research findings which show that Americans' speech does, rather nonsubtly, reveal social status and some possible implications of the way persons are affected by the social-status revealing aspect of their speech.

Barber states that regional differences in accent and diction are probably greater than differences of social class position. His statement seems to overlook the fact that listeners may be able to recognize the social-status cues in a person's speech in spite of the speaker's regional dialect.

Baltzell goes slightly beyond Barber's statement when he suggests in *The Philadelphia Gentleman* that there are some similarities in the speech patterns of upper-class persons which cut across regional dialects, but he limits such cross-regional speech patterns to the upper class.[3] Research findings suggest that there are actually similarities which cut across dialects for the middle and lower classes also. Putnam and O'Hern[4] recorded one-minute samples of speech from 12 Negroes of different educational and social backgrounds. The speech samples consisted of each speaker telling in his own words the fable, "The Lion and the Mouse." The speaker's social status was determined by the Warner index. After hearing these short recordings, 55 white university student judges produced mean ratings of the speakers' social status which correlated .80 with the Warner index scores. This study shows that "whites" can identify the social status of Negroes. Putnam and O'Hern in discussing the findings pointed out that the various Negro speakers had a variety of regional dialects such as Southern, Eastern and "General American." Yet, these differences in the dialects of the speakers did not inhibit the judges' ability to identify the speakers' social status.

This same set of tape recordings used by Putnam and O'Hern was used by L. S. Harms in a study in the Midwest (Putnam and O'Hern's study was conducted in Washington, D.C.).[5] Harms found that the Midwestern listeners were as accurate as the Eastern listeners in identifying the social status of the Negro speakers.

A study by the present author also supports the contention that regional dialects of speakers do not inhibit the ability of listeners to identify the speakers' social status.[6] The speakers in this study were 12 college freshmen. Though the majority of the speakers spoke "General American," several speakers had an "Indiana Twang," one speaker had a New York accent and one had a rural Southern accent. The social status of the speakers was determined by use of the Hollingshead *Two Factor Index of Status Position.*[7] Each speaker made a

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] "Accent clearly distinguishes the Southerner from his countrymen in the Middle West or New England. At the same time, there is a subtle upper-class accent in America which cuts across regional differences." Taken from *The Philadelphia Gentleman* by E. D. Baltzell (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 50.

[4] G. N. Putnam and E. M. O'Hern, "The Status Significance of an Isolated Urban Dialect," *Language,* 31 (October-December, 1955), pp. 1-32.

[5] L. S. Harms, Unpublished Research, Reported on by Phillip K. Tompkins, "Speaking Ability and Social Class," a paper presented at the 1963 convention of the National Society for the Study of Communication, Denver, Colorado.

[6] D. S. Ellis, "The Identification of Social Status from Limited Vocal Cues," unpublished paper, Purdue University, Communications Research Center, Department of Speech, 1963.

[7] A. B. Hollingshead, *Two Factor Index of*

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40-second recording of the fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." These short recordings of the speakers' voices were played to groups of from 15 to 20 upper division students who served as judges. The judges produced mean ratings of the speakers' social status which correlated .80+ with the Hollingshead measure. The evidence from the three studies cited here all indicates that persons can identify social status regardless of the regional dialect of the speaker.

A second assumption made by Barber was that, "All social classes speak roughly the same, except that the better educated upper and middle classes have better diction and grammar." Putnam and O'Hern conducted a linguistic analysis of the 12 speakers used in their study. They brought out that the upper-class speakers had a marked sophistication in vocabulary and sentence structure and spoke with a clear, logical simplicity. The lower-class subjects used several sound substitutions such as the use of /aɪ/ and /æu/ as allophones of /aɪ/ and /au/, respectively and spoke with great weakening of the consonants, especially the stops. Their grammatical structure was extremely simple.[8] From the Putnam and O'Hern analysis, it appears that though grammar and diction are important status cues, the differences between the speech of upper- and lower-class persons in America is more complex than Barber's statement implies.

There is currently some work being done in England by Burnstein of the University of London, Department of Sociology, which suggests that persons of different classes and different backgrounds do not really share a common language, or as Burnstein states it, a common "code." This same concept is supported by general semanticists such as Wendal Johnson and S. I. Hayakawa.[9] The general semanticists point out that words do not have meanings; only people have meanings, and they assign those meanings to certain symbols, the most common of which we call words. The meaning a person assigns to a symbol depends upon the person's background. It seems obvious that the backgrounds of rich and poor are going to vary greatly. It should, therefore, be just as obvious that the meanings the rich and poor assign to symbols will vary greatly, and, thus, the symbols used by the two groups to express the same concepts should be expected to vary greatly.[10]

Osgood has conducted research, using his semantic differential scales, which has shown that the meanings of words vary from group to group. The semantic differential studies, most highly related to this paper, are those that compare the meanings assigned to words by workers as compared to managers. These studies clearly are comparing the language codes of two different social classes. The findings consistently show that there are gross differences in the codes being used by the two groups.[11]

The evidence cited above indicates that there are major differences in the speech of different classes of Americans and the differences are neither subtle nor restricted to differences in diction and grammar as is suggested by Barber.

The discussion will now focus on studies which have directly investigated the effect of diction, grammar and other speech cues as indicators of social status.

In the Putnam and O'Hern study, it was reported that the major cues the listeners used in identifying the social status of the speakers were: "inclusion of aberrant vowel and diphthong allophones, consonant articulation, and the degree of sophistication of vocabulary and sentence structure. . . ."[12] They made no attempt to isolate the amount of independent effect any of these variables had in revealing the speakers' social status. They concluded, "Further research is needed to discover just what features are most diagnostic of social status."

Status Position (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 1-11. The two factors are the education and occupation of the head of the household.

[8] Putnam and O'Hern, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-30.

[9] An excellent review of general semantics can be found in Wendall Johnson's *People in Quandaries* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1946).

[10] An example of the difference in the use of words to express an idea would be the two statements "I got'a buck," and "I have a dollar"; or, "He's a cool swinger," and "He's a nice guy."

[11] C. E. Osgood, G. T. Suci, and P. H. Tannenbaum, *The Measurement of Meaning* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1957).

[12] Putnam and O'Hern, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

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L. S. Harms conducted a study using nine Midwestern, white speakers.[13] Instead of telling a fable, his speakers responded to printed cards which said such things as "How are you?" "Ask for the time." Harms pointed out that though his listeners could identify the social status of his speakers, the cues they based their judgments on were not obvious.[14] He stated, "They could be based on word choice, pronunciation, grammatical structure, voice quality, articulation and several other observable variables." The listeners could not indicate whether they based their judgments on one variable or several.

The study mentioned earlier by the present author found results similar to those of Putnam and O'Hern, and Harms. Two follow-up studies were conducted to partially isolate the effect speech cues—such as diction and grammar—had in revealing social status.[15]

In the follow-up study, instead of telling an impromptu version of the fable "The Tortoise and the Hare," as they had done in the first study, the speakers were instructed to role-play that they were honor students selected to conduct the university President and his guests on a tour of a new dormitory. The speakers were told to use their very best grammar and voice quality, and to try to "fake" their voices to make them sound upper class. The listeners were able to identify the social status of the speakers, in spite of the speakers' attempts at role-playing or "faking." However, the accuracy of the listeners' judgments dropped from a validity coefficient of .80+ in the first experiment to .65+ in this one.

It was assumed that since all of the speakers were college students, they could all use correct grammar and sophisticated sentence structures if they consciously attempted to. A later analysis of the speech samples proved this assumption to be only partially correct. The subjects all used proper grammar, but their choice of vocabulary, sentence length, sentence structure, and their fluency varied greatly.

This experiment indicated that grammar may be a factor, but not the only factor giving cues to the speakers' social status. It also points out that speakers cannot easily hide or fake the social-status-revealing cues in their speech. A second follow-up experiment was designed which could more rigidly control the speech variables heard by the listeners.[16]

In this experiment the speakers each counted from one to 20 at a set rate of speed. This eliminated the speech variables of vocabulary choice, sentence length, sentence structure, grammatical usage, and fluency. Counting from one to 20 was chosen in preference to some other list of words because: (a) counting from one to 20 requires a person to use almost every common sound in the English language, (b) the pronunciation of the numbers is well known to all classes and should not reflect one's educational background, and (c) the numbers are as well known and commonly used by the members of one social class as another.

The listeners were able to identify the social status of the speakers after hearing each speaker count for only 20 seconds. The ratings of the listeners correlated .65+ (significant at the .01 level) with the Hollingshead status position scores of the speakers.

These findings indicate that some of the cues listeners use in identifying speakers' social status are based on stimuli such as grammar or word choice which were eliminated from this third experiment, since the accuracy of the listeners dropped from a validity coefficient of .80+ to .65+. But, a major part of the cues upon which listeners base their ratings of speakers' social status comes from the way the subjects speak individual words. The cues may be in the pronunciation of the words or in some tonal qualities of the speakers' voices.

In relating these findings back to Barber's statement that "diction and grammar" are the two factors which differentiate the speech of upper- and lower-class individuals, it becomes apparent that his statement is not entirely false, but is rather a gross oversimplification. Even under the broadest definitions of the words "grammar" and "diction," it seems difficult to classify the list of speech variables discussed above, which could be used as cues for dis-

[13] L. S. Harms, "Listener Judgments of Status Cues in Speech," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 47 (1961), pp. 164-168.

[14] Harms determined the social status of his subjects by using the Hollingshead *Two Factor Index of Status Position.*

[15] Ellis, *loc. cit.*

[16] *Ibid.*

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criminating between upper- and lower-class speakers.

Barber's explanation of why the grammar and diction of the upper-class subjects is superior to that of the lower-class subjects also seems to lack empirical support. Barber states that it is due to the superior education of the upper-class speakers. Yet, in the three experiments by the present author, the speakers were all college freshmen. This indicates that they all had the same number of years of schooling and all had been in the upper one-third of their high school class scholastically. The S.A.T. scores of the speakers were not significantly related to their social status.

This indicates that formal educational differences, if a factor at all, are not the only factor which affect the social status revealing cues in speakers' voices. Nor is the intelligence of the speaker (as measured by S.A.T. scores) the major factor which determines these status revealing cues. It seems logical to assume that the speech qualities which reveal social status are not a product of anything so simple as "amount of education," but are rather a product of the speakers' total environment. It seems naive to assume that a lower-class rural Negro who is fortunate enough to receive a good education, but returns to work in his rural community, would adopt the speech patterns of the upper classes. It seems far more logical and obvious that a person will speak as the persons he intimately associates with and identifies with speak.

Now that the oversimplifications of Barber's statement about language as a symbolic indicator of social status have been discussed, some additional research findings not related to Barber's statement will be presented.[17]

Harms measured the social status of his listeners as well as the social status of his speakers. He found that there was no significant difference between the way high-status, middle-status, and low-status listeners rated M.S. speakers or L.S. speakers. But he did find that the L.S. listeners rated M.S. speakers significantly lower (sig. at .05 level) than did M.S. or H.S. listeners. This difference was small and was not explained by Harms.

Harms also had his listeners rate the credibility of the speakers. Again, he found that generally the M.S., H.S. and L.S. listeners rated the credibility of the speakers about the same. He then correlated the ratings of the speakers' social status with the ratings of the speakers' credibility. He found all correlations to be significant at the .05 level, indicating that high status persons are perceived as being more credible than low status persons.

Highly related to these findings are some of the findings in the series of experiments by the present author. In two of these experiments the listeners rated how well they liked each speaker. These ratings of "likableness" of the speakers correlated with the speaker's Hollingshead Status Position score .76 (sig. at the .01 level) and with the listeners' ratings of the speakers' social status .60 (sig. at .05 level). These findings tend to support Harms' findings,[18] i.e., they suggest that when listeners hear even very short samples of a person's speech, they are able to make a value judgment about how well they would like the person. These value judgments of the listeners are highly related to the social status of the speakers.

The present author then constructed a rating scale of "job-type best suited for" to see if his listeners could make a meaningful value judgment about the type of work each speaker is best suited for; and to see if these value judgments are related to the social status of the speakers. The job-type scale used had seven different occupational categories described on it, one to correspond to each of the seven levels or types of employment described by Hollingshead in the *Two Factor Index of Status Position*.[19] The listeners heard the recording of

[17] These additional findings are drawn from the works of the four authors already cited, since these authors are the only ones which have reported experiments dealing with status cues in speech. One other study related to this area, but not reviewed here, was recently completed at the University of Chicago. The study used a sample size of four. And those four were reported to be extreme cases.

[18] These correlations are from the first experiment in the series on social status. In this experiment, the listeners heard the speakers tell a fable. In the experiment in which the listeners heard the speakers count the correlations were smaller, but still significant at the .05 level.

[19] Hollingshead, *op. cit.*

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the speakers' counting. The correlation between the Hollingshead Status Position score of the speakers and the listeners' ratings of the job-type the speakers were best suited for was .67 (sig. at the .01 level).[20] These findings suggest that listeners, when rating the type of job a person is best suited for, are actually identifying the general level of employment which corresponds to the social status of the person. A discussion of the possible implication of these and the other findings will be presented in the next section of this paper.

One fact seems obvious from the review thus far presented: much more research is needed in this area. The author has not been able to locate a single study conducted by a sociologist which investigates the symbolic significance of speech as an indicator of social status. The studies conducted thus far have been done by persons in speech or linguistics: persons who lack an interest in social status as such. Donald G. MacRae, a sociologist, pointed out in an article in 1953 entitled "Social Stratification: A Trend Report," that sociologists have ignored the area of "vocabulary and speech structure." He said sociologists should devote more attention to this area. A review of the literature since 1953 suggests that the MacRae suggestions were not heeded.

To explain why speech should receive special attention as a symbolic indicator of social status, one need only ask himself, how many persons hear me speak every day? Speech is the primary medium which all persons use to affect the society in which they live, and the main medium through which they are affected by that society.

Research by Dusenbury and Knower[21] has shown that auditory cues provide more information about personality traits than do visual cues. And a study by the present author[22] has shown that when raters make judgments about speakers based on both auditory and visual cues jointly, the auditory cues strongly dominate over the visual cues. Barber has stated that the symbolic implications of American speech in relation to social class are subtle, but the research reported in this paper suggests that whether subtle or not they are easily recognized by all classes of Americans, and they label the speaker as belonging to a certain social class. The research further indicates that persons speaking one accent of American English can identify the social status of the speech of persons using different accents of American English. In short, the research implies that how one speaks reveals his social class. This conclusion raises two other major questions: (1) is this label a handicap to the lower-status persons, and (2) if it is a handicap, how hard is it to change one's speech?

There is some research which indicates that the label may be a handicap. The research of Harms and the present author, already reported in this paper, has indicated that listeners rated lower-status speakers as less credible than higher-status speakers. If these listeners make the same type of judgments in a nonexperimental situation—for example, in an interview—the lower-status person would have a disadvantage. There are over 170 million employment interviews conducted in the United States each year.[23] Much research has indicated that interviewers frequently base their decision about whether or not to hire a man on some personal whim, or a mannerism of the applicants which is totally unrelated to their qualifications for the position.[24]

In the series of experiments by the present author, the speakers were all college students. These students' social status was determined by the educational and occupational backgrounds of their fathers (the head of their household). So, in fact, the study shows that the children's voices reveal the status of their family backgrounds. The students in these ex-

[20] This correlation is exactly the same as the correlation reported earlier between the speakers Hollingshead Status Position score and the listeners (a different group of listeners) ratings of the speakers' social status.

[21] Delwyn Dusenbury and Frank H. Knower, "Experimental Studies of the Symbolism of Action and Voice," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 24 (1938).

[22] Dean S. Ellis, "The Effects of Limiting the Amount of Exposure Between Interviewers and Interviewees," unpublished paper, Communications Research Center, Purdue University, 1964.

[23] Roger Bellows, *The Psychology of Personnel in Business and Industry* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1961).

[24] A review of literature on this topic can be found in Roger Bellows and M. F. Estep, *Employment Psychology: The Interview* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1954), chap. 8.

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periments were all engineering students; in a few years they will all be interviewing for jobs which are classified by the Hollingshead index as upper-status jobs. The evidence thus far presented, though not conclusive, suggests that the student who comes from a lower-class family is likely to be discriminated against at hiring time. A controlled study is needed to investigate whether or not such discrimination really takes place, but a study of engineers by Perrucci lends some support to this concept. He found that engineers from low-status backgrounds earn less than engineers from higher-status backgrounds.[25] However, there are many factors other than voice qualities of the speaker which could account for this difference in earning power, such as individual aspiration and family connections.

Though the evidence is not conclusive, it strongly suggests that the social acceptability of one's speech is a source of discrimination.

The discussion thus far has dealt with only one possible area in which a person may be discriminated against—the interview situation. The variety of other interpersonal situations which exist in our society could all be given as other possible examples: buying a house, joining a club, etc. Just how extensive such discrimination might be is a question which can be answered only by further sociological research.

We now turn to the second question. How hard is it to change the status-revealing qualities of one's voice? This question cannot be fully answered because research has not yet discovered exactly what the status-revealing qualities of speech are. Putnam and O'Hern's concluding statement to their article is not too encouraging.

> The importance of speech as a mark of social status is a matter of great social significance. It is known that speech habits are not easily altered: the phonetic speech features, which proved to be most distinctive of social status, are probably more resistant to change than non-phonetic speech habits. Persons who grow to adulthood as members of an underprivileged social group may carry a mark of their origin through life and suffer from the various forms of discrimination which society imposes on members of the lower socio-economic classes.[26]

This view seems a little pessimistic. The voices of students in the present author's experiments revealed the social status of these students' fathers. In the Harms, and the Putnam, and O'Hern studies the speech samples were of persons who were the heads of their own households. Their voices revealed their own social status; if any of the speakers in those two studies had fathers of a lower social status than their own, it indicates that with time and change of environment, the status-revealing qualities of one's voice may change to reveal the person's new status. Again no definite statement can be made due to a lack of research.

Harms suggests that voices can be changed, but Harms, who is a speech teacher, warns that, "when making a student aware of the different and unacceptable features of his speech, the teacher has a strong responsibility to assist the student systematically. Otherwise, the loss in confidence may far outweigh the possible gains of a partly learned new dialect."[27]

For the final thought on this subject the lesson from *Pygmalion* seems appropriate as a warning. Professor Higgins was able to change the flower girl's speech, but neglected or was incapable of changing her values. As a result, the girl was left with speech symbolic of the upper class, which, Shaw pointed out, would be as great a hindrance to her with her lower-class friends as lower-class speech would be in an upper-class gathering.

Speech is only one indicator of social class, and though it is an important one which should not be ignored, it should always be viewed in perspective. There is some evidence that the status-revealing cues in speech can be changed, but these changes, if not accompanied by complementary changes in the rest of the person's environment, may create as many problems as they alleviate.

[25] Robert Perrucci, "Social Class and Intra-Occupational Mobility: A Study of the Purdue Engineering Graduate from 1911 to 1956," thesis, Purdue University, 1959.

[26] Putnam and O'Hern, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[27] Harms, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

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